

KeizerCommunity

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Every child deserves a birthday party

By DEREK WILEY
Of the Keizertimes

When Laura Perez, former principal at Whiteaker Middle School, returned from a mission trip to Mexico committed to make a difference in her community, she met with Sheronne Blasi, and the two friends went on a long walk.

"We just had a shared vision for the work we'd like to do and the impact we'd like to have in our community," Perez said.

That vision was Simply Birthdays, a non-profit created by Perez and Blasi that holds birthday parties at two local homeless shelters—Simonka Place in Keizer and Salem Interfaith Hospitality Network, as well as provides party supplies for the Center for Hope and Safety.

"I grew up in poverty and didn't really have birthday parties," Blasi said. "So when we heard about work like this, for me it was very, very personal."

The parties, which are held each month, begin with crafts and games.

The kids then sing *Happy Birthday*, blow out the candles, eat cake and then open presents.

Thanks to generous donations, each birthday child receives four to five gifts total-



Submitted
A child blows out her candles during a party at a local homeless shelter provided by the non-profit Simply Birthdays.

ing about \$75.

The rest of the kids and parents are given goodie bags and books.

"This is one of those experiences that provides some normalization for kids," Perez said. "When they can go to school on Monday and talk about their birthday party, that's a shared experience that a lot of kids have so they're able to talk about all the kids that came to their party and the presents that they got and the activities that they did."

At Simonka, there are typically 12-15 kids and another 20 adults.

Perez remembers one

of the first parties when a woman living at the shelter who just couldn't believe they were there, shook and pressed two dollar bills in her hand afterwards.

"I don't have much but this is to help with the next party," the woman said.

"There have been many parties where either the birthday child or the mom will come up afterwards and say to us 'thank you, this is my best birthday ever' or 'this is my only birthday party' and to have a child say 'this is my best birthday' and they're living in a homeless shelter. That says a lot," Blasi said.

While providing birth-



KEIZERTIMES/Derek Wiley
Sheronne Blasi, left, and Laura Perez, former principal of Whiteaker Middle School created Simply Birthdays two years ago.

days parties to children who wouldn't otherwise have one is Simply Birthday's primary mission, Blasi and Perez also want to help people see a different face for homelessness.

"A lot of times people do want to get involved and they want to help the community but they're not exactly sure how to do that so this is their first step in," Perez said. "So they might come to our party and they might help hand out cake and ice cream or goodie bags but that got them in the shelter. There are other things they can do once they come in. It gets them in the door so we do have a secondary mission that's pretty important as well."

Blasi said the support of the community has been "overwhelming" and "awe-

inspiring."

Marco Polo Global Restaurant in Salem has provided a personalized cake for every birthday child over the past two years. Keizer Chamber, Rotary and Fire Department and many others have also donated to the cause.

"I would like people to know how much I appreciate their support," Perez said. "We couldn't sustain this. There's no way. We wouldn't have the resources. We don't have the time. We've talked so many times how meaningful that is to us."

When a group of Western Oregon University students organized a party for a class project, they came back transformed.

"They were all excited but it wasn't actually until they came to the shelter and

interacted with the kids did they really realize the impact that they were having and their professor at Western told us for a lot of those kids, that one experience and that day that they spent at the shelter was just transformational for them because a lot of those kids had never interacted with the homeless population," Blasi said. "We're trying to communicate to the community about what homelessness really looks like so the other thing we would absolutely love is for people to reach out to us and if they're at all interested, to come to a party, to volunteer at a party."

For more information on Simply Birthdays, including dates of parties and other ways to help, visit simply-birthdays.org.

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